

# Ed Noonan steps aside (from page 1)

The Myrna now has a budget of more than \$700,000 and offers over 30 performances a year, ranging from cutting-edge dance and theatre to more mainstream fare. The theatre boasts a state-of-the-art sound system and new digital film projectors and movie screens.

"You know how it is with arts organizations," he says. "It's very tricky and difficult work to do. But we got through that hard time, thanks to such a supportive community."

"People were willing to help out," he adds. "We moved forward step by step."

The center also had a national reputation, thanks to the efforts of its founder, Arnie Malina (who retired in 2012 after 15 years as director of the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, VT). But it took time for funders and presenters in the arts world "to learn and appreciate that things were getting better."

"I think we're lucky," says Noonan of the center's turnaround. "It's an ongoing reality that everybody is always on the edge of a possible crisis – drops in funding, a recession."

## Taking risks

During his tenure, Noonan has developed a reputation for introducing cutting-edge and contemporary artists that other presenters in the state might shy away from.

He attributes that success to a few factors. When he stepped in, the Myrna already had a history of bringing avant-garde dance companies to town. Its offerings continue to entice audiences from beyond Helena "who don't have as much of an opportunity" to see contemporary dance.

Noonan also realized that very few organizations beyond urban centers offer more cutting-edge programming. "Funders and presenters want to reach rural areas. Once you develop a reputation of doing that kind of work, there are good opportunities on the national level to get support for it."

Of course, you need an audience too, and over the years, Helena has delivered that. "If you support new work, you're not always sure what it's going to be," he says. "Our audience is tolerant, and we often get to see really good work."

## Building an audience

Audiences aren't homogenous, even in a relatively small town like Helena. "I see it as a town that's stratified, so many busy worlds running parallel to each other – very seldom to you get a sense of the whole community."

People have eclectic musical interests, for example, ranging from jazz to Celtic, from classical to bluegrass. An arts presenter's challenge is to speak to a multitude of audiences, and hopefully find some that overlap.

"We can't reach them all with a show, but we can reach small pockets," he says. And over time, "you get a larger part of the community involved."



Ed Noonan with a statue of the Myrna Loy Center's namesake. (Photo by Eliza Wiley/courtesy of the Independent Record)

## The evolution of a board

A supportive board has been crucial to the Myrna's success. However, Noonan notes, "a board in an emergency is different from a board in a crisis." He's experienced both.

When he stepped into his role at the Myrna, the board "was running the organization. It wasn't what they wanted or signed on for, but it's what they had to do."

Gradually, as the Myrna righted itself, "they were able to shift out of day-to-day management."

Board members bear a large responsibility, even during less turbulent times. They have to be prepared "to work hard in moments of crisis," and remain engaged when the crisis subsides, because setbacks are inevitable.

"You shouldn't get on a board if you don't understand the fundraising role," he adds. "Board members have to do the legwork for the organization."

## Shaped by the arts

"I'm driven by the desire to see arts imbedded in kids' lives," says Noonan. "One of the wonderful things about Helena is the opportunity kids have to be involved in the arts at an early age."

He contrasts that experience to his own background, growing up in Butte. The local high school had a theatre program, but that was about it. A budding thespian, even as a small child, "I somehow always found a way to keep going."

That tenacity, and a certain flare for salesmanship (his father sold advertising for the

Montana Standard for "his entire adult life") certainly came to his rescue at the Myrna.

"I don't know how you'd do without it," he says. "You do have to get out there."

In addition to pursuing the arts as a kid, he also had early experience as an arts promoter, bringing Gary Lewis and the Playboys to town when he was in junior high to play during the state AA basketball tournament. He encountered a lot of skepticism along the way.

"I learned right away that you can't be mad at everybody. You've got to engage people calmly and get them to grow to see your perspective," he says. It's a lesson that continues to inform his approach to arts management, and life.

## The future

Noonan's job has been divided in two: an artistic director, in charge of film and performance programming; and a managing director to oversee finances, marketing, public relations and development.

Peter Ruzevich has been promoted from box-office manager and film programmer to artistic director. Since joining the staff in 2001, he's served as artist-residency coordinator,

working with artists from across the nation to develop school and community programs. In addition programming films for the past seven years, he's also been facilities manager, overseeing a major upgrade in the theater's film and sound equipment, and attended booking conferences and helped book performers.

Plus, he's an actor, having appeared Off Broadway, in Seattle and with Grandstreet Theatre, Carroll College and Helena Theatre Company.

Ruzevich brings "strong skills and continuity" to the job, says Noonan.

Other changes at the Myrna include Errol Koch, who has joined the staff as the tech director, and Zachary Lachenbruch, a full-time program associate. Due to the loss of a major grant from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, the center has placed its search for a managing director on hold.

As for the poet and playwright, he looks forward to pursuing his own work, teaching a few classes at Carroll College, and completing some children's projects. "It's a good time for me to go."

He leaves a few words of advice for the community he loves and those who will guide the Myrna Loy Center in the years to come: "The organization is doing good work, and it needs help. No one – not the community or the organization – should ever take that for granted."

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# State art standards (from page 1)

The process will include focus groups, an open nomination process for writing and review teams, and a public comment period during the adoption process. The revised standards must be adopted by the Montana Board of Public Education and will be brought forth for consideration by the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The Montana Arts Standards revision will begin in Spring 2015 with a series of public focus groups around the state convened by the Montana Arts Council to discuss the current state of arts education in Montana, how the current arts standards are serving Montana's students, and where there is room for improvement. Nominations for standards writing and review teams will also be taken during this time.

For more information about the Montana Standards for Arts revision process, or to find out how you can get involved, contact Emily Kohring, director of Arts Education at the Montana Arts Council at 406-444-6522 or ekohring@mt.gov.



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## History conference mines Treasure State's past

President Abraham Lincoln signed Montana Territory into existence on May 26, 1864. In commemoration of the 150th anniversary of that momentous event, the 41st annual Montana History Conference will look at landmarks of the Treasure State's past Sept. 18-20 in Helena.

Beginning with the First Peoples, who called this place home long before Montana became Montana, conference sessions will highlight notable people and events that continue to impact life under the Big Sky today. Topics include Native peoples' sustainable lifeways; cowboy artist Charlie Russell and Senator Lee Metcalf; the founding of Missoula, Helena and Butte; the abandonment of eastern Montana homestead-era communities; the women's suffrage movement; the 1972 Constitutional Convention; the 1964 flood; and the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Montana.

Thursday's workshops offer hands-on, practical experience, while Saturday's field trips provide a first-hand glimpse of some of Helena's historic treasures.

The Montana Historical Society hosts this enlightening and informative look at 150 years of Montana history. To register or get obtain more information, visit mhs.mt.gov or contact Deb Mitchell at dmitchell@mt.gov or call 406-444-4789.

# Words of wisdom for arts presenters

Ed Noonan, the departing executive director of the Myrna Loy Center in Helena, has accrued a wealth of wisdom over 35 years as an arts presenter and 14 years as director of a nonprofit arts organization.

Here are a few tips for those who share his passion for bringing the arts to audiences:

- 1. Be in touch with your constituents:** "Be honest about what's going on ... You're not operating in a vacuum, you're operating in a community. Get them invested in both the problem and the solution."
- 2. Pace yourself:** "Develop a mindset of doing what you can in a day. You can't deal with all of the problems at once."
- 3. Don't personalize it.** "You can't carry the whole thing on your back."
- 4. Get organized:** "My office is filled with all these things – and none of it is in drawers. But you have to be able to sit down and prioritize, otherwise you'll be overwhelmed."

- 5. Be passionate about the arts, and their survival:** "The Myrna is important to me. It's a place where I, as a playwright, have been able to present my work. I'm driven by a desire to see it continue, and to see the arts imbedded in kids' lives."
- 6. Have a good product:** "Use the best judgment you can, do the research, go to showcases, and make decisions about what's good."
- 7. Understand its value:** "You have to have a sense of why something is good, why it's important – it makes you more confident. The same thing with grant writing: You have to articulate why something is good in a clear and precise way."
- 8. And then, go sell it:** Noonan, the son of an advertising salesman, is adamant that salesmanship and marketing skills apply to artists and arts organizations alike. "I don't know how you do it without that. You have to get out there and sell it to people."

– Kristi Niemeyer